Original Article

MEN'S HEALTH ACROSS THE LIFESPAN: POST TRAUMATIC GROWTH AND GENDER ROLE IN MALE SURVIVORS OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Hazel Lewis[1], Gundi Kiemle[1], Michelle Lowe[2], Robert Balfour[3]

[1]Doctorate in Clinical Psychology, University of Liverpool, UK

[2]University of Bolton, Bolton, UK

[3]Survivors West Yorkshire, Bradford, UK

Author for correspondence: Hazel Lewis: hazel.lewis2@nhs.net

Abstract

Background: Due to societal stereotypes around masculinity (i.e. men should be strong and able to physically resist an offender), male survivors of child sexual abuse (CSA) frequently experience sexuality and gender role crises, as they tend to blame themselves for not protecting themselves. The negative effects on male and female survivors of sexual abuse are well documented. There is some evidence to suggest that female survivors may experience post traumatic growth (PTG) although less is known regarding male survivors and PTG.

Aims: To explore the PTG processes involved in the development of positive gender roles and sexuality in male survivors of CSA.

Method: Recruitment through national male survivor support organisations and social media resulted in a sample of 12 participants from the UK, EU and USA. Qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted, transcribed and analysed using social constructionist thematic analysis.

Results: The parallel processes of "struggling and changing" and "developing and growing" were evident in the PTG journeys of participants. Eight subthemes were developed relating to gender role redevelopment to illustrate the experienced positive change: "Turning point," "Redefining masculinity and sexuality," "Reconnecting," "Determination," "Appreciation of life," "Living by masculine values," "Attunement" and "Stronger person" in the context of a central "environmental" theme.

Conclusions: This study has provided much-needed empirical support for the development of positive gender role and sexuality following CSA and has enabled conceptualisation of PTG in male survivors.

Keywords: gender role development; male survivors of child sexual abuse; masculinity; sexuality; post-traumatic growth

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, child sexual abuse (CSA) has become an expanding area of interest, yet there is gap in the research of male survivors, and under-reporting remains a global problem. Due to societal stereotypes around masculinity (i.e. men should be strong and physically able to resist an offender), male survivors are more likely than female survivors to be viewed negatively for not defending themselves during an assault.[1] Males who experience child sexual abuse tend to feel discouraged from disclosing incidents,[2,3] often resulting in survivors not receiving the support they need.[1,4] With global prevalence of male CSA estimated at 8%,[5] the risk to boys in particular is evident. Recent Home Office statistics show a sharp increase of 202% in reporting of CSA since 2013,[6] perhaps due to survivors' willingness to report after Operation Yewtree. However, despite growing demand for victim support, a lack of empirical investigation around the experiences of male survivors, means many services struggle to know how best to meet their distinct needs.[4,7]

Effects of CSA

CSA can have profound lasting effects into adulthood.[8] Child survivors often feel different to others, which can lead to an entrenched sense of inferiority.[9] Developmentally, male survivors struggle to make sense of the abuse and often experience feelings of shame, leading them to form negative views of themselves which can impact on their sense of self or identity.[10,11] Masculinity is brought into question as male survivors often blame themselves for not fighting back or coping with the psychological consequences.[2,9] Traditional views of masculinity imply that men are strong, powerful and sexually dominant.[12] Male survivors may feel inadequate if they are not able to protect themselves or live up to the masculine expectation.[4] Many believe their masculinity has been compromised,[11] viewing their perceived "lack" of power or control as evidence that they are "less of a man."[10] Some male survivors question their sexual orientation following victimisation.

Experiencing involuntary physiological effects of the assault, e.g. sexual arousal,[13] or being abused by a female, can be confusing for male survivors as the sexual contact was unwanted.[14] Perceived changes to their masculine identity and/or sexual orientation may result in gender role crises, impacting on their sense of belonging to the male group.[7,9]

The psychological effects on male survivors are prevalent and long-lasting.[15,16] Studies have found an array of complex mental health problems including depression,[15] self-harm,[11] suicidal ideation,[17] psychosis[18] and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).[16,17] In addition, the annual costs (based on 2012/13 figures) of child sexual victimisation (for both males and females) in the UK are estimated at £3.2 billion[19] due to healthcare treatment, child social care and criminal justice system fees. The damaging long-term impact of male CSA is evident. However, the evidence of recovery and living well beyond abuse is sparse. To date, the majority of male survivor research has focused on the negative effects of CSA, with little research exploring positive changes as a result of such trauma.

Post traumatic growth (PTG)

A growing number of studies have found that some female survivors can experience positive changes following sexual victimisation, including increased ability to relate to and help other victims,[20] feeling stronger as a person[21,22] and appreciation of life.[23] These positive psychological changes can be understood within the context of PTG, a process experienced as a result of the struggle with a major life crisis or a traumatic event.[24] Unlike similar constructs such as resilience, PTG differs as it implies that transformation takes place following trauma, resulting in a change in functioning.[25] Evidence of growth experienced in specific populations following trauma are widely documented, including cancer survivors,[26] trauma workers[27] and war veterans.[28]

Studies have found various factors can increase the likelihood of PTG such as coping styles,[25] social support[26,27] and cognitive strategies, such as

rumination, perhaps due to the struggle involved in the process.[29,30] It is important to note that PTG does not occur in the absence of negative consequences of trauma, such as psychological distress or PTSD, but rather, can coexist as independent constructs.[29,31,32] Interpretation of the trauma event/s seems important in facilitating PTG. Research suggests survivors' perceived control in the trauma and the degree to which they define themselves by the event/s were found to predict PTG.[29]

PTG and survivors of CSA

The majority of research on PTG in survivors of sexual victimisation has focused on female survivors[20,22,23] or children.[21] Few studies have included male survivors in the sample, however the disproportionate ratio of males means that there are no distinguishable outcomes from which it can be generalised.[27,32] Given the distinct difficulties encountered by male survivors of CSA, it is hypothesised that the processes involved in PTG may differ for male survivors of adult sexual victimisation and survivors of other types of trauma, as men who were sexually victimised as children may struggle to (re)develop or (re)establish a healthy and positive sense of their gender role, sense of self, masculinity and sexuality.

Only one study quantitatively examined factors related to PTG among men with histories of sexual victimisation. Associations were found between PTG and level of understanding of the sexual abuse and conformity to masculine norms.[33] The study concluded that men who manage their emotions in line with traditional masculine norms may struggle to experience PTG due to their inability to "open up" and understand the abuse and experience the intense emotions that occur within this. Whilst offering preliminary insight into PTG and male survivors, this study and the majority of research into PTG and survivors of trauma is largely quantitative and based on standardised responses from questionnaires. Without qualitative investigation, there is limited understanding of the complex processes involved in facilitating PTG. One's "perception of the trauma event" has been found to essential in PTG,[29] which therefore warrants the need for a robust, in-depth exploration of male survivors' subjective interpretation of the trauma and how it has impacted on their lives.

Rationale and aims

To date there are no published qualitative empirical studies exploring PTG in male CSA survivors, thus highlighting the gap within the literature.

The current study therefore aims to explore and make sense of the experiences and processes of PTG in adult males who experienced CSA and who have managed to develop (or recover) a healthy and positive sense of their own gender role. So, only men who have self-identified themselves as having experienced some degree of PTG in relation to their CSA were recruited so that they could understand this process better. This enabled an in-depth exploration of the processes involved in the development of male survivors' gender roles, sexuality and masculinity.

METHOD

Design and sample

Qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with a non-clinical sample of 12 participants to facilitate exploration of emotional growth and positive change. The inclusion criteria stipulated that participants must be adult males (aged 18 or over) who had (1) experienced sexual victimisation before 16 years and (2) self-identified as having been able to develop or establish a healthy and positive sense of their gender role/sense of self/masculinity/sexuality. The exclusion criteria specified that participants would be excluded if they did not meet the inclusion criteria, were non-English speaking or displayed ongoing difficulties (i.e. substance use problems, mental health difficulties, suicidal ideation) impacting on their capacity to give informed consent and meaningfully engage in the interview. Participants were between 34 and 65 years old and resided across the UK, Europe and the

US. The ethnicities of participants included white Irish, white Dutch, Black American and nine white British. The sample consisted of varying sexual orientations including heterosexual, gay and bisexual participants (see Table 1).

Recruitment and procedure

Recruitment was done through three UK-based third-sector organisations that specifically support male survivors of sexual victimisation, and via social media. Flyers outlining information about the study and contact details were displayed at the nominated support groups and advertised via social media (i.e. Facebook, Twitter). Interested volunteers were sent a participant information sheet and consent form outlining the inclusion criteria. Eligible individuals were contacted to discuss consent and any other queries; those who did not meet these criteria were sensitively screened out and signposted to relevant support services. Four interviews lasting approximately 60 min were carried out in a private room at a convenient location of their choice; eight were conducted remotely via video call. Whilst face to face interviews were considered preferable, video call interviews were offered to facilitate national and international sampling. Interviews were audio-recorded and contemporaneous notes were taken by the researcher. Transcription of verbatim occurred 2 weeks after completion.

Data collection

An interview schedule was developed and used as a topic guide during the interviews. Language and framing of questions were considered to maximise insight into the lived experiences of male survivors. Five broad topic areas with additional questions and prompts explored: the context surrounding the victimisation experience, participants' perception of male stereotypes, experience of their own gender role (including masculinity and sexuality), experiences of growth and positive change, and perceived determinants of their own growth and change. As such, the interview schedule was centred about growth experiences and asked for limited information regarding the victimisation experience.

Ethics

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Liverpool Research Ethics Committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. They were informed that their participation in the research was entirely voluntary and that they had the right to

TABLE 1. Participant Demographics.

Participant pseudonym	Age range (years)	Country of residence	Ethnicity	Method of interview
Jack	30–34	UK	White, British	Video call
Adrian	40–44	UK	White, British	Video call
Mathew	50–54	UK	White, British	Video call
Frank	60–64	Europe	White, Dutch	Video call
Ben	60–64	UK	White, British	Face to face
Ted	40–44	US	Black, American	Video call
Nigel	50–54	Europe	White, Irish	Video call
Kevin	60–64	UK	White, British	Face to face
Phil	65–69	UK	White, British	Video call
Paul	60–64	UK	White, British	Face to face
Jim	60–64	UK	White, British	Video call
Toby	30–34	UK	White, British	Face to face

request withdrawal of their data up to the point of transcription. Anonymity was ensured through the use of pseudonyms and omission of any identifiable information from the transcripts. All identifying participant information was kept confidential. A debrief information sheet was provided to participants, outlining relevant organisations for further support post interview, if necessary.

Data analysis and epistemology

Data were analysed by thematic analysis (TA) where patterns within the data are identified and interpreted by the researcher.[34] The purpose is to create a narrative explanation which accurately describes the phenomena being researched. A constructionist epistemology was adopted to explore how concepts and language were used by participants to form socially constructed ideas (e.g., masculinity, sexuality). Social constructionism postulates that experiences and perceptions are influenced by history, culture and language, and the same event can therefore be experienced differently.[35] Whilst either experience is accurate, it is how each is subjectively perceived that creates more than one "meaning" to an event. Analysis of such "meanings" enables understanding of the social realities that exist within specific cultures and allows us to hypothesise about human functioning.

Analysis was also informed by Foucauldian theory[36] which implies that power relationships exist in all interactions and societies, often expressed through language and practices. Foucauldian analysis therefore explores how participants "position" themselves in their talk. For example, language used may indicate a perception of power (i.e. "victim" may imply a sense of powerlessness, given the helpless nature of the role, whereas "survivor" may infer a sense of being powerful, given the notion that one has outlived an adversity). This is pertinent to understanding the growth experiences of male survivors, given the potential variation of power relationships throughout their journeys.

Whilst TA has the advantage of being theoretically flexible, the approach necessitates a number of methodological decisions to be made before the analysis in order to establish a solid framework that corresponds with the requirements of the research aims.[34] Because of the familiarity with the literature, the analysis was largely theory-driven to fit the specific aim of the research question. The researchers were interested in the way PTG played out across the data which became the focus of analysis. Following each interview, the author noted any thoughts, feelings and reflections from the process. The transcripts and reflective journal were read and re-read to become familiar with the data and notes pertaining to initial ideas were made. Coding of each transcript was conducted on a semantic level to describe the "surface" meanings of the data.[37] This process was carried out electronically using NVivo Pro software to manage the large dataset. In line with a social constructionist TA and drawing on Foucauldian analysis, the following questions were considered when coding the transcripts:

- What were the events and experiences that are being constructed by the participants?
- How are the participants' positioning themselves in their talk?

Once a first cycle of codes had been applied, transcripts and recordings were revisited to establish the accuracy and objectivity of codes and recoded where required. Codes were then grouped together based on likeness and synonymy to illustrate emerging patterns.[37] Categories were generated in collaboration with the research team to minimise subjectivity, following thorough revisions of the data. Where relevant, codes were added to more than one category. Comparisons were made with the PTG literature to guide thematic conceptualisation about the processes involved.[38] A level of interpretation was required to develop themes to explain the progression from categorised codes to reflect the salient literature. For example, codes such as "getting specialist support," "believing they were not to blame," "becoming a father," "incurring a physical injury," "moving away" and "connecting

with others" were categorised together due to their similarities that were being constructed by the participants (i.e., events that created change). Reference to PTG literature facilitated interpretation of these individual processes as a "turning point," whereby growth occurs following trauma due to a change in perspective. Foucauldian constructionist analysis further enhanced interpretation through reflecting on the shifting positions of power being constructed by participants as a result of the turning point. Extracts of the transcripts were checked and matched against the potential themes to ensure they accurately reflected the meanings evident across the sample.[38] Final analysis involved looking at all themes across the dataset to categorise them into two major overarching themes that describe the processes taking place. The themes were reviewed again in relation to the PTG literature to refine and expand this knowledge with context to male survivors.

RESULTS

Following analysis, two overarching major themes were evident, illustrated by exemplar quotes, along with eight subthemes and one underlying central subtheme. The themes are labelled and visually presented in a way to signify the parallel and concurrent processes, characteristics and outcomes involved in the participants' journeys of PTG. (see Table 2).

Whilst the subthemes constituting the process of "struggling and changing" naturally occur prior to outcomes involved in "developing and growing," it is imperative to note that participants did not complete one "subtheme" before beginning another. In fact, the process of going back and forth between each "subtheme" was evident across the data as participants experienced growth as well as ongoing struggles with the consequences of CSA. For example, masculine values seemed to be continually shaped by participants' evaluation and redefinition of masculinity, rather than static consequences of the process. As such, these processes were not linear in a temporal sense, but rather, interconnected in terms of their individual lived experiences and interpretation of such over time. "Environmental context" was apparent across the themes and appeared to distinctively shape participants' growth experiences.

The themes can be better understood with a visual representation in the form of a double helix diagram (Figure 1). The PTG helix illustrates the interdependent and interconnected processes that were evident in the findings, providing a metaphorical interpretation of the ongoing nature of these participants' journeys.

Major themes

"Struggling and changing" refers to the process whereby participants experienced a variety of challenges that they had to endure in order to grow. These challenges seemed to facilitate a process of exploration and self-discovery in which participants tried to make sense of their experiences. Change

TABLE 2. Major Themes and Subthemes

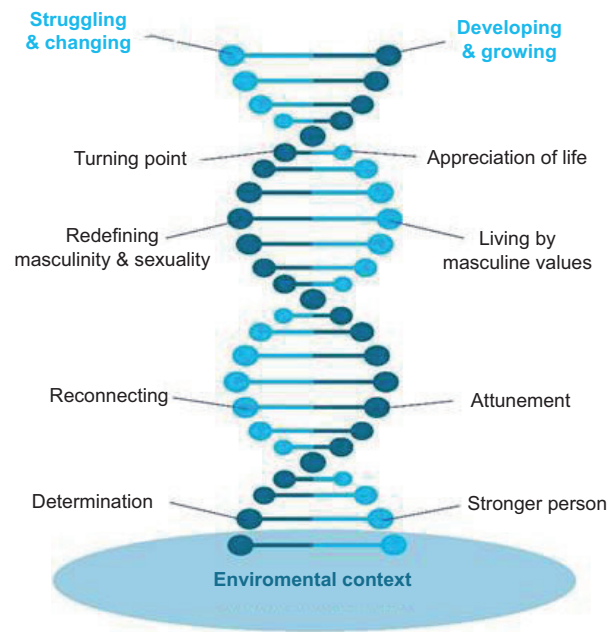| Struggling and changing *"You've got to do some digging I think to grow and you've got to explore your feelings"*	Developing and growing *"I really do believe that the recovery process has made me into the person who I am today"*
Turning point	Appreciation of life
Redefining masculinity and sexuality	Living by masculine values
Reconnecting	Attunement
Determination	Stronger person
Environmental context	

FIGURE 1. PTG Helix: Visual representation of the interconnecting parallel processes involved in PTG.

occurred across various domains, specifically in their perspective of their abuse experience, masculinity and sexuality, and how they related to themselves. Their determination seemed to enable them in the process of "struggle and change."

"Developing and growing" refers to the positive outcomes of their struggles. This growth was acknowledged in a number of ways, including an appreciation of life, living by their masculine values, their ability to relate to others and being a stronger person. All participants acknowledged that they had experienced some sort of individual transformation in their identities, related to these themes. For some, the process of experiencing growth and positive change was longer than others, yet all reported a sense of struggle in order to get there.

Themes

Turning Point. Participants reported negative effects of the CSA which led to years of emotional suffering and difficulties coping. Participants reported a "turning point" in their lives when an

opportunity led them to re-evaluate or modify their lives in some way, change their perspective or give them hope. This process did not occur as a rapid change in response to an event, but rather as a gradual transition over time. For some, this was centred about getting specialist support after a disclosure or breakdown/crisis point. For others, a change in perspective seemed to occur from understanding that the abuse was not their fault, after many years of believing they might be responsible for the abuse. One participant explained,

> Now I have learnt it, it wasn't me, it's him. It's always gone through my mind, why did I go there, why did I do this, why did he do that to me, and now I know, that, whatever I would have done, he would have done it to me, his intentions were, to do what he did to me. (Mathew)

Life circumstances such as becoming a father, incurring a physical injury or moving away led some men to re-evaluate their lives and make intrapersonal changes. Ted reported, "Getting away from all the people that knew about my story, gave me a clean start with my life." Connecting with others who had similar experiences caused a change in the perspective of how some men viewed themselves, enabling them to take steps to make changes to their lives. Whilst the length of transition seemed to vary for participants, the experience of re-evaluating perspectives following a turning point was evident for all.

Appreciation of Life. Following the "turning point" process, participants described end points to their struggles such as a "greater appreciation of their lives" due to having new opportunities, a greater perspective or that their lives had changed for the better through acceptance or forgiveness. One man described this as,

> It's like some positivity coming out now that it's giving me a massive understanding of life itself. (Ben)

Participants reported feeling confident when trying new things and experiencing new opportunities, as a result of their struggle, such as undertaking challenges for charity and talking with journalists and the media, which would not have been possible otherwise. Gaining perspective from their experiences, sometimes through comparison with others in different contexts and tragedies, enabled some men to see "the bigger picture," in which they felt grateful, strong and content with their lives. A prominent feature was acceptance and forgiveness as a way of overcoming their struggles to enable the men to move on with their lives, "rather than getting locked down in a spiral of self-pity, which doesn't help anyone" (Jack).

Redefining masculinity and sexuality. As children, participants reported a traditional conceptualisation of masculinity; that they must be strong, powerful, emotionally stoic and heterosexual. Growing up, this often led to gender shame and/or confusion in their sexual development, given the messages that males are not victims of sexual abuse. Some men overcompensated by "sleeping with as many girls as possible" (Adrian) or being aggressive towards others, "to prove to the lads how tough I were because my father had treated me like a sex object and told me I were a coward" (Ben).

As traditional masculinity proved a dysfunctional idealism for participants, many described the iterative process of redefining this stereotype in line with their experiences which helped the men adopt a more contemporary expression of masculinity. Evaluating the usefulness of aggressive behaviours and emotional stoicism enabled some men to drop the "tough guy" masculine characteristic and "open up" to share their emotions and vulnerabilities. One participant explained,

> It's kind of how I was brought up, you know, don't complain about things, just get on with it, erm which is a good attitude to have in some aspects of life…..but sometimes you do have to stop and put your hand up and say, you know, this isn't working here. (Jack)

Similarly, re-evaluating hypersexual behaviours and separating the abuse from current intimate relationships seemed to enable some men develop more healthy sexual relationships, "I didn't recognise what had happened to me as an abusive experience. I thought it was a homosexual experience" (Toby).

Living by masculine values. Participants described their sense of masculinity often reflected their ongoing re-evaluation of the concept, which brought about openness to newfound masculine values in the development process. One participant described,

> I think as part of my recovery process I got a lot of other messages about what it means to be a man. That a man can be caring, that a man can be sensitive, a man can love, a man can be gentle, a man can be a whole human being. (Nigel)

Those participants who were fathers or had a desire to become a father talked about the importance of "being a good male role model" (Ben). Some participants spoke about the importance of love and intimacy in their relationships with partners which brought about values "sensitivity" and "trust." Achievement and physicality were also evident for some men to value and relate to their masculine bodies through exercise, sports, walking, climbing, one man explained, "I think it's to do with the fact that I have used my body in a way that [men are] meant to use their body" (Phil).

Reconnecting. Given that the participants had experienced years of disconnection from themselves in some way (i.e. substance misuse, blocking things out, disassociation, escapism, isolation), many described a process of self-discovery in which they were able to reconnect to themselves to "recover me and who I really am" (Kevin). Some participants had avoided physical touch or neglected their bodies for many years and the reconnecting involved a long and challenging journey of getting used to physical touch. Trust was an important aspect to reconnecting with the body; learning that physical contact can

be nurturing and not sexual which became possible through massage, bodywork, psychodrama and looking after their bodies better through exercise and self-care. One man explained,

> The first really hard piece of work I had to do at the beginning of the recovery process was to reclaim my penis…..I had to get to a point where I could touch my penis. (Nigel)

Reconnecting with childhood was also a prominent feature, given childhood memories were often tarnished by the abuse or in some cases completely blocked from participants' awareness. The process of reflecting on their pasts to recover positive memories with the aid of photos or therapy helped some men identify who they were as children to recognise their strengths, "It's been not just associating myself and who I am with the bad stuff, I have quite a lot of good stuff as well" (Kevin). Writing letters to themselves as children or through safe discussion in therapy enabled some men to recognise their childhood character and attributes "What kind of child was I? What did I enjoy?" and reconnect with a lost part of them, "It was like a Tardis where l led step by step to safely travel to my past until I could unify my fragmented self and be present" (Jim).

Attunement. Participants described an end point of the process of reconnecting and how their experiences had led them to develop an increased level of awareness and insight. Participants spoke about feeling informed and being able to think "deeper" as a result of their struggles as well as having a greater understanding and empathy for others, "being more aware to who people really are inside" (Ted). The ability to relate to other male survivors led some participants to feel more connected, "I'm not alone, there are other people who've had the same experiences, it's been very powerful" (Nigel).

Determination. Personal characteristics of self-discipline and determination were apparent in participants' journeys of self-discovery, "I wanted to know about it myself. I wanted to do anything I could do myself with this situation" (Frank). The act of progressing in self-discovery despite challenges faced seemed to provide a sense of purpose. Striving for justice was prominent for some participants which seemed to mediate determination and harness attitudes to "not give up." The men found being "strong minded" or "having a positive mindset" helped them "move on and make the most of the positive" (Jack). Some participants persevered by "seeking help" and "taking control" when things got tough. However, the sense of unfinished work was talked about by participants; that there was still further to go in terms of self-growth, "I believe it's going to be a lifelong journey" (Ted).

Stronger person. Participants described feeling stronger because of their experiences "I really do believe that the recovery process has made me into a person who I am today" (Nigel) and more independent as a result of their struggle, "I'm better at making decisions for myself and not relying on other people to make decisions for me" (Jack). Some men reported becoming more assertive as a result of their experiences, "I'm a bit more likely to tell people where to go if they are doing something that gets on my nerves" (Jack) and feeling more confident in themselves, "Now I can go into meetings and not be scared that I'm going to get found out or people are going to do me down" (Jim). Being genuine and moral were key attributes and responding to others in a way that was consistent with personal values signified that some men felt stronger, "I won't hold back now, you know if I think something's inappropriate I'll definitely tell them" (Adrian).

Activism was a prominent feature. Participants described how, because of their position, they felt it was important to forgive something back to help others, "I feel that it's incumbent on me to give back, in a sense" (Nigel). Given the difficulties faced, participants felt the desire to "speak out" about their experiences to challenge ignorance or prejudice which helped them "become more comfortable with who I was" (Nigel). One man described how the process of

doing something worthwhile to help others helped him grow,

> Taking a negative experience and trying to do something with that, that either improves your life or the lives of others you know or both, if possible, I think growth can come from that mindset. (Toby)

Central theme

Environmental context. Participants identified a range of external factors that either enabled or restricted their progress. These were generally related to societal views around masculinity and how recent changes with this have brought about changes in male survivors being accepted. Participants reported that their development as a man was often restricted due to stereotypes of traditional masculinity "masculinity, in my decade is the 60s, was an entrapment and a prison cell" (Paul) and stereotypes of gay men "the portrait, that all gay men are promiscuous and take risks…I didn't feel like that" (Toby). However, changes over the last few decades were acknowledged as enabling greater acceptance of a variety of masculine ideals, "masculinity has been reformed a little so you can be, artistic, colourful and entertaining" (Paul).

Participants described the impact of societal attitudes towards masculinity and male survivors of sexual victimisation restricted their disclosures, silencing them for decades, "I guess it takes a more masculine role model in footballers coming out and saying 'yes, it happened to me' for it to become part of the conversation" (Adrian). Being believed was understandably important for growth, and participants reported how societal awareness about CSA enabled them to disclose as they were "more confident they would be believed" (Mathew). However, some men felt that victims are still stigmatised, "nobody really wants to talk to you, it is as though we are tainted, we are in some way part of the problem" (Phil).

Familial and social support were reported to be integral in some men's growth journeys, "She [friend] encouraged me to trust myself, to believe myself" (Nigel), whereas services were found to be both hindering or enabling, depending on their approach and ethos, "I think I wouldn't have ended up here if [the service] weren't so upfront about the fact that this is a male service…..this idea of being able to identify was important" (Toby).

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to explore and make sense of the processes of PTG in male survivors of CSA; more specifically, how male survivors have (re) developed or (re)established a healthy and positive sense of their own gender role.

Analysis supports the hypothesis that male survivors of CSA can, and do, experience positive change and emotional growth as a result of the trauma. It is widely assumed that those who experience CSA are "damaged" individuals and research has tended to focus on the negative consequences of CSA.[15–17] Similar to that of female survivors, male survivors in the present study also experienced positive change in their ability to relate to and help other victims,[20] grow stronger as a person,[21,22] and appreciate life.[23]

Given the distinct difficulties encountered by male survivors of CSA, in addition to the PTG experiences of female survivors, this sample also evidenced the growth processes that were related to masculinity and sexuality. Our study agree with previous literature that men who manage their emotions in line with traditional masculine norms may struggle to experience PTG,[33] and findings of this study went further to explain how participants went through a process of "redefining masculinity and sexuality" in order to inform their new "masculine values." This involved reassessing the aspects of traditional masculinity and finding alternative male attributes that reflect a more contemporary expression of masculinity. Consistent with previous research, the process of renegotiating traditional masculine norms appears to be important.[10] Therefore, PTG seems to emerge from the critical

exploration and refinement of the masculine construct to reflect male survivors "real life" emotional and psychological experiences.

Findings suggest that PTG is an ongoing interconnecting process. Therefore, male survivors' experiences are likely to be complex and idiosyncratic. Similar to psychological models of bereavement,[39] progression through such stages of grief or growth is not necessarily linear or discrete. Rather, it is interconnected to other aspects of the journey and includes a parallel process of oscillating between struggle and growth. Growth is not a destination; it might be best understood as an ongoing exploration. As such, the notion that male survivors will no longer struggle with the consequences of CSA once growth has been achieved is also negated. These findings add to the ambiguous literature around the temporal course of PTG. Whilst some studies found length (period) of time from the traumatic event correlates with PTG,[26] and argued that mediating factors such as individual circumstances and "use" of time are more relevant.[33] PTG in male survivors of CSA can be conceptualised using the helix diagram (Figure 1) of interacting processes of "struggle and change" and "growth and development," which therefore supports the hypothesis of non-linearity. If, or when, growth stops, or conversely—once begun, does it ever stop?—are questions yet to be explored.

The major themes found in this study seem to support the wealth of PTG literature that suggests that distress and growth are two separate constructs and can co-occur together.[29,31,32] There is evidence that for some groups (i.e. university students, cancer survivors, bereaved people, female survivors of sexual victimisation), high levels of distress have been significant in facilitating PTG,[26,27] perhaps due to the self-exploration or rumination involved.[29,30] Whilst it is yet unknown whether this is evident in the male survivor population, these findings provide initial insight into the concept of distress and growth as independent constructs.

A theme of a "turning point" emerged from the data which was triggered by a change in perspective or re-evaluation of circumstances. The process of participants realising the CSA was not their fault was important and supports the literature that many male survivors are conflicted in believing they might be partly responsible for their abuse if they did not fight back.[2,9] Perception of the trauma experience has been found to be essential for PTG to take place.[29] Therefore, it seems that relinquishing blame facilitated a change in perspective and initiated a greater "appreciation of life" in male survivors.[23] This theme also supports quantitative evidence that a "turning point" was positively related to PTG in male survivors of CSA.[33]

"Disconnection" is the body's way of protecting oneself during periods of trauma.[40] The findings suggest that survivors' ability to reconnect to their bodies, sexuality and childhood helped in promoting PTG. It is understandable that this process might be challenging, given the body being the scene of the crime, past sexual contact being exploitative and childhood being a position of vulnerability. However, the exploration enabled survivors to gain control and reduce the associated shame so their bodies, their sexuality and childhood could be experienced in a positive way. These findings support literature that survivors of CSA benefit from reframing their traumatic experiences[41] and lend further evidence that one's perception of control is influential to PTG.[29] The process of reconnecting to themselves in turn facilitated "attunement," or simply, an increased ability to relate to others. This has been found amongst other survivors of trauma and is integral in PTG.[20]

The desire to give something back and help others was evident in male survivors identified as "stronger" in this research, consistent with previous literature in PTG.[20] The act of helping others seems to, in turn, facilitate growth in oneself. However, it is important to acknowledge that whilst activism was commonly experienced in this group of participants, it is unsurprising, given how and where they were recruited from and the nature of participating in research being an act of activism. Nevertheless, the timing of activism seems important, perhaps

survivors need to experience growth individually before they can help others.

Clinical implications

The findings of this study have potential implications for support services and practitioners, who often struggle to know how best to meet male survivors' distinct needs. It is important for the heterogeneity of the male survivor population to be acknowledged and responded to. Individual experience is context-specific and it was apparent that participants' views and experiences were unique to them. Therapists should first take time to establish a trusting relationship with male survivors to enable safe exploration of their experiences. A careful and comprehensive assessment and formulation will highlight the unique and idiosyncratic needs of each individual.

Knowledge about PTG after CSA can be helpful for male survivor services and clinicians. It is important to dispel the myth that CSA results in victims being "damaged," as this evidence suggests that some survivors report becoming "stronger" individuals. Psychologists can play a key role in developing psychological interventions that promote PTG with a view to help survivors to experience positive change following trauma. A focus on reducing distress has largely dominated therapeutic goals, yet evidence suggests that growth can co-exist alongside distress and it seems, be enhanced by the struggle involved. Male survivors may interpret ongoing distress as a setback or lack of progress and therefore clinicians should convey the idea that struggling is actually a part of growth. Interventions that focus solely on reducing distress may be inadequate in meeting survivors' needs.

A "turning point" was found to be integral to male survivors' growth journeys, often preceded by a change in perspective in how they perceived the CSA. Therefore, facilitating a process of re-evaluation with male survivors to help them understand they were not at fault is a key aim for therapists. It seems that PTG does not occur without critical and challenging exploration of the Self. Enabling reflection of masculinity and sexuality may also help them identify barriers to personal change (i.e. a belief that emotions are a sign of weakness, may inhibit exploration of such). Furthermore, male survivors should be supported to identify their stereotypical beliefs about masculinity, re-evaluate their function and redefine their gender role to include more positive and healthy male attributes that fit with their experiences. A values-based intervention such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) may help with this.[42]

The shame felt by male survivors following CSA seemed to contribute towards a sense of disconnection from themselves for many years. Therapeutic work, therefore, might involve reconnecting to themselves in a safe and contained way. Clinicians may wish to encourage male survivors to explore the positive aspects of their bodies, their sexual organs, and their physicality, perhaps through physical touch or exercise, to enable experiences that are shame free. Facilitating reflection on themselves as children; their character and attributes, through the use of photos, letters, or imaginary exercises, may help them recover a lost part of them and recognise their strengths as children.

Strengths & limitations

These findings have provided some empirical evidence of the growth experiences of male survivors of CSA. This is the first known qualitative study to explore PTG in male survivors of CSA. Given the CSA literature is largely focused on negative consequences, this study has provided evidence to support the scarcity of research to suggest PTG, or positive change is possible, following CSA. The research offers in-depth insight into the interconnecting processes involved in PTG of male survivors of sexual abuse. This evidence provides a framework for which the complexities of male survivors' gender role and sexuality growth journeys can be better understood.

There were methodological limitations. The choice of analytic method, whilst considered theoretically flexible to interpret the data from

a constructionist and Foucauldian perspective, may have impacted the findings. The interpretive power is limited in TA due to the lack of a theoretical framework, and analysis is largely driven by the relationship of the researcher and participant in "co-producing" the findings.[43] Interpretation is therefore influenced by the position of the researcher (e.g. age, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation) which can often lead to bias during theme development. Furthermore, familiarisation with the literature is likely to have guided interpretation the data, perhaps fitting the researchers' analytic preconceptions. Alternative qualitative methods may have acknowledged the complexities of sense-making or the hermeneutic aspects of interpretation offering a more sophisticated level of understanding.

Unfortunately, CSA rarely occurs in the absence of other types of abuse and, therefore, difficulties may be indicative of physical or emotional abuse, for example. Therefore, it is difficult to determine whether an outcome is a result of CSA or another form of abuse or in fact whether it is mediated in some other way. Furthermore, given PTG often naturally occurs alongside time, it is likely that positive change will increase as one gets older. This raises the question of whether the changes experienced by male survivors are indicative of PTG, or perhaps simply growing older or maturing. An explicit measure of "duration of growth" may have informed these discussions. Comparison groups are not featured in qualitative research, given the idiosyncratic nature of participants being explored. As such, the findings can only illuminate the relationship between CSA and PTG, and not indicate causality.

The sample consisted of Western males who were predominantly white and they may have differing views and experiences of growth compared to male survivors from other cultures. Inclusion of additional socio-demographic information such as employment status, relationship, parenthood would have enhanced application of findings. Activism was important to many male survivors in this sample and, therefore, participants may have been more likely to seek help, which may not be representative of the male survivor population. All the participants were linked to support services in some way (either recruited from or through their social media), and therefore it is possible that the findings only apply to this particular context. Participants who take part in research might be more motivated to speak out or have stronger opinions, meaning their views are overrepresented.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Future studies should recruit a diversity of male survivors from different cultural backgrounds. Alternative strategies of recruitment may enlist hard-to-reach male survivors who have no affiliation with support services.

Studies may wish to build on the hypothesis of a "turning point" to explore mediating factors that might be significant such as timing. The current study is the first to focus specifically on the redevelopment of gender role and sexuality in male survivors and therefore, more evidence is required. The influence of fatherhood or physicality in male survivors' growth journeys warrants further research. Exploration into the processes of activism in PTG would help to establish whether helping others facilitates growth in male survivors and at what point this is likely to benefit.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite narratives that victims of CSA are damaged individuals, the male survivors in this study were able to experience personal positive change as a result of their struggles. In line with theories around non-linearity of PTG, the processes of positive change were experienced are parallel and interconnected in nature where male survivors oscillated between "struggling and changing" and "developing and growing" throughout their ongoing journeys. Male survivors were able to redevelop a healthy sense of gender role and sexuality through a variety of specific processes. This research has provided a much needed empirical evidence of positive

gender role and sexuality development following CSA and has enabled conceptualisation of PTG in male survivors. Furthermore, the findings evidence the importance of gender-informed support provision and growth-based clinical interventions for male survivors.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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